

another thousand stashed away, we've got the miniscule total of £2,500 for our whole church wedding.

So, meet Laurence. He's 38, clever, fair haired and handsome (to me especially) and works as a lecturer in digital photography. Beneath his calm and conscientious exterior he's a mix of art student bohemian, lover of serious books and ideas, and 100% loyal romantic. He's also as daft as a brush in his private moments, which is one of the million reasons I love him. And finally, he's what he describes as 'sensible' with money. In other words, there's a long standing joke amongst his family that they'll have to bring their own sandwiches, if he ever gets married. Over my dead body.

We met via the internet in 1999 and our first date was literally a melding of two soulmates; I knew we would be together forever. We found we loved the same books and music, that we are both the youngest of three (him of three brothers, me of three sisters) and even our names, Laura and Laurence, echo rather spookily. Three weeks after we met we were in Prague, and since then we've journeyed and eaten our way around a fair amount of the globe, got engaged after his proposal at Aphrodite's Rock in Cyprus, bought a house and here we are – both wanting to be married but not at all sure about how to go about this wedding lark.

Problem Number One (the only one we've addressed so far) was finding a venue. We've bought a house together in the beautiful village of Dodleston in Cheshire. The village has a delightful and ancient church but no obvious venue to wine and dine our guests afterwards.

## A Place For Us

### Venues

Choosing your venue is inextricably linked to the final cost, atmosphere and visual impact of your wedding. Do you want to spend your whole day at 'Approved Premises' or have a religious or civil wedding followed by a party elsewhere? For a full list of legally approved premises visit your local Register Office or [www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk) and search by postcode.

#### 1 **Combined Ceremony and Celebration**

There are over 4,000 approved premises in the UK with proposed legislation likely to make many more available in the future. From zoos to sports grounds to orangeries and castles, it's less hassle for your guests and of course less of a logistics battle for you. Disadvantages can be:

- Conveyer belt services with rent-a-wedding backdrops in a bland function room.
- Complex pricing structures that can tie you into in-house caterers and suppliers.

*Country house hotels: about £500 plus £200+ ceremony fee*

*Small castle or stately home: day hire starts at £3,000*

*Top historical properties – wedding package including food and accommodation: start from about £10,000*

#### 2 **Separate ceremony and celebration**

*The ceremony*

A legally recognised ceremony must be conducted by:

- A Registrar at a civil ceremony in a Registry Office or approved premises, or
- A minister of a recognised religion at an appropriate location approved for marriage.

*Registry Office wedding: about £100*

*Church wedding: around £300*

*Post-ceremony celebration*

After dealing with the legalities at a civil ceremony or religious venue, there are no limits but your imagination on the venue for a party:

*At home or someone else's home: nil*

*A restaurant: bill plus optional small charge*

*Anywhere from art galleries, boats, country houses, theme parks, to the top of a mountain: just check with the owners and pay as appropriate*

Reluctantly deciding against our own village, I started to search further afield. Then, after a few week's internet frenzy, Laurence made another Big Pronouncement. He hated hotels. He had been to too many dreadful hotel weddings. Another few days of obsessive search continued with nothing appealing, save for a few hours wasted daydreaming about remortgaging the house to hire a medieval castle. Then, one night as I stared at another dreary hotel banqueting room on the computer screen, a potentially perfect site surfaced from my frazzled unconscious.

It was a warm sultry evening last summer and Laurence was teaching his evening class. Jumping in the car I set out for Eccleston, a tiny but quintessentially lovely village on the edge of the Duke of Westminster's estate, where his former workers live in fairy tale houses and barley-twist chimneyed cottages. At the centre of the village is a vast High Gothic church replete with the Duke's coat of arms on the golden gates and a stunning avenue of lime trees leading to the oak doors. Laurence had taken me to see the village when we first met and it has a dreamlike quality, a mixture of half-timbered black and white Grimm's Fairyland and the surreal Englishness of Alice In Wonderland. Of course there are no pubs, hotels or guest houses, so like our own village it lacks

any obvious venue for the reception. Yet – I had just remembered that by the meadows stretching down to the River Dee stands a long, low building with a lawn at the rear. A small sign answered my wish – *Village Hall*. It looked perfect. Peering in, I could see that it was stark and plain but had a stage, a high beamed roof and a kitchen to the rear. Perfect. With timing that now seems destiny, I strolled up to the church to find a friendly middle-aged man exercising a huge wolfhound. I had bumped into Jonathan, Rector of Eccleston, and his dog Lupus. Jonathan showed me around the impressive church and I knew I had in one stroke found a combination of church, reception venue and kindly and like minded minister. Within two weeks we had booked the church for our wedding and I had an agreement for hire of the village hall for the modest sum of £200. So, the one document I have ready to file in my purple folder is the contract for our venue, written out in beautiful copperplate lettering.

Thursday 2nd January

It's now more than six months since that booking and I have nothing else to show for it. No dress, no caterer, no photographer, nothing. After our first shared Christmas together in our new house it's time to make some resolutions:

New Year's Resolutions

***I will (sounds very wedding-like already)***

- Organise wedding in calm and professional manner as befits former personnel and training manager
- Lose one stone (to look curvy but not fat in wedding dress)

- Begin proper beauty routine (on sudden nightmare realisation should have done this since puberty or even birth)
- Go to gym three times a week and draw motivation from focusing on wobbling bits in mirrors
- Share beautiful, exciting wedding preparations with Laurence
- Subtly persuade Laurence to prepare wedding in my own meticulously pre-planned way
- Motivate fab team of helpers so I can simply drift through preparations in zen-like calm
- Keep to £2,500 budget
- Win loads of bridal competitions as only possible way to stick to budget
- Use our wedding to show how much we love everyone

### ***I won't***

- Get ridiculously stressed out like typical neurotic brides
- Eat usual diet of deadly dull low fat food supplemented by thrilling high fat gastronomic experiments
- Lose more than 1 stone, to avoid turning into haggard Miss Haversham lookalike
- Be intimidated by mad looking ancient harpie-like wedding shop assistants
- Behave like natural scruff, but instead project radiant image of young at heart bride to be
- Use credit cards for wedding day magnificence resulting in married life of debt and misery
- Leave *anything* to the last minute
- Bake my own wedding cake (definitely)
- Let anyone upset me
- Have a wedding like anyone else's ever in the whole history of the universe

I've invested in a new purple folder with *Wedding: 30th August* written in wonky biro on the spine and packed it with bundles of empty plastic sheets. I've also invested in a huge blue concertina file marked with little tabs I've optimistically completed called *Stationery, Ceremony, Food and Outfits*. And, of course I've got this brand new Memories Journal with a whole doorstep of scarily blank pages. Turning to the white expanse of page marked 30th August I feel a chill settle on me even colder than the icy swirls decorating our windows. Disaster or dream day? It just doesn't bear contemplation.

### Time Management

#### Getting Organised

Be prepared to generate more paperwork than an over-zealous civil service department. At the minimum you will need:

- An A4 folder, paper and pens
- Concertina file for cuttings
- Stationery for business letters
- A pocket address book

To indulge yourself consider:

- A Wedding Planner to complete
- A large pinboard or scrapbook to get creative with your snaps, fabric scraps and samples
- Your own journal to record the ups and downs of your wedding planning

TIP: Find a quiet corner to dedicate to your wedding planning so paperwork won't be disturbed

